Maharlika

PINOY LIFE IN THE MARIANAS

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Jeepney 4 Sale

For almost a month now, a Philippine jeepney has become something of a fixture on Beach Road.

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KC Mania

Sharon Cuneta seemed irked when she was interviewed about the picture of her daughter KC Concepcion and TV director Lino Cayetano that came out in this column last week.

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Pinoys back federalization

But are also worried of impact on employment

By LIBERTY DONES
REPORTER

If you ask Filipino workers, most of them would say that they strongly favor the federalization of the CNMI, but some of them are also worried of its impact on their employment, said a leader of the United Filipino Organization.

"Of course, if you ask them, they will say yes to federal takeover because many of them have been here for 20 years. But it's a mixed feeling at this time because they also worry about their jobs. What happens if their companies close down if federalization takes effect?" said Ed Reyes, co-chair of UFO, an umbrella organization of more than 20 Filipino associations in the CNMI.

He said what worries nonresident aliens in general is the uncertainty about the federalization.

"What if the company decides not to renew the employee? What if the company closes down? What if the company decides not to sponsor you? That's the fear of many workers," said Reyes.

He said it would bring an air of relief if the federal government itself recognizes the role

PINOYS Page 2

AP

NAVAL VISITOR
U.S. Navy ship USS Blue Ridge (LCC 19) prepares to dock at the South Harbor Thursday Feb. 8, 2007 in Manila, Philippines. The USS Blue Ridge is visiting the Philippines to deliver donated goods, conduct medical mission and help build roads, schools and public buildings.

Remittances hit all-time high: $11.44B

By DORIS C. DUMLAO
INQUIRER

Overseas Filipino workers sent home $11.44 billion in the first 11 months of 2006, an all-time high, up 17.6-percent from the same period in 2005, the central bank reported Monday.

In November, the money remittances amounted to $1.14 billion, up 27.8 percent from a year earlier, keeping the monthly level at the $1 billion for the seventh straight month.

There is a strong possibility that the full-year 2006 total will exceed the central bank's projection of $12.3 billion, said

REMITTANCES Page 2

Gusto mo ba ng 'Gusto'?

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

For over two decades now, the Filipino community in the CNMI has been enjoying high quality Pinoy-style food, courtesy of an entrepreneurial couple who wanted nothing more than to bring the Philippines closer to their kababayans in the Commonwealth.

It was in 1985, when Lito and Malou Mendoza established their very own company, L&M Enterprises, on Saipan. Under the busi-

GUSTO Page 2

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

L&M Enterprises owners Lito and Malou Mendoza display their top-selling products Chicharon, Gusto Tocino and Gusto Longanisa inside the processing area of the company in Finasisu.

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PINOYNEWS

POLO warns OFWs vs illegal recruitment

By MARCONI CALINDAS
REPORTER

The Philippine Overseas Labor Office of the Philippine Consulate General is warning all OFWs working in the Commonwealth against illegal recruitment schemes that could possibly take place on the island.

Labor attaché Joan Lourdes Lavilla said the Filipino community should be diligent in learning more about the jobs they are applying for outside the CNMI. She said whenever there's going to be recruitment activities on the three islands, the applicants should ask questions like the recruiters' license and job orders for its clients' workforce requirements.

"Don't be afraid to ask questions. Inquire with appropriate institutions about its legality whether they are licensed to recruit," she said.

This is particularly true if the recruiting party asks for outright payment for processing or placement fees.

Lavilla said, "Never part from your hard-earned money that easily."

She said there are accredited agencies in countries or territories where Filipinos are applying for work.

To avoid illegal recruitment in the Commonwealth and other parts of the world:

■ Do not apply at a recruitment agencies not licensed by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration.

■ Do not deal with licensed agencies without job orders.

■ Do not deal with any person that is not an authorized representative of a licensed agency.

■ Do not transact business outside the registered address of the agency. If recruitment is conducted in the province, check if the agency has a provincial recruitment authority.

■ Do not pay more than the allowed placement fee. It should be equivalent to one-month salary, exclusive of documentation and processing costs.

■ Do not pay any placement fee unless you have a valid employment contract and an official receipt.

■ Do not be enticed by ads or brochures requiring you to reply to a PO Box and to enclose payment for processing of papers.

■ Do not deal with training centers and travel agencies, which promise overseas employment.

■ Do not accept a tourist visa; and,

■ Do not deal with fixers.

PINOYS
FROM PAGE 1

of the long-staying nonresident workers in the CNMI.

"Would the years of stay of a nonresident be recognized by the federal government? What happened is that many of us have spent most of our years here but there has been no assurance of permanent residency," said Reyes.

He said that, based on his interaction with Filipinos on Saipan, it appears that many of them would choose to stay in the CNMI even if they get improved immigration status such as a green card.

"They like it here. They like the way of life here. It's totally different if you move to the states," he said.

Reyes said the Filipino community in the CNMI is most interested in the ongoing talks about possible federalization of the CNMI.

The U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, which has jurisdictions over insular areas including the CNMI, held a public hearing on the local immigration last night.

The hearing's live Friday telecast online began at 12:30am and ended at about 3am Saipan time.

The hearing was led by committee chair Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D, NM), and Sen. Daniel Akaka (D, HI).

Lt. Gov. Timothy P. Villagomez spoke on behalf of the CNMI government while Saipan Chamber of Commerce president Juan T. Guerrero represented the local business community.

The two panelists expressed opposition to a federal takeover.

Other panelists from the CNMI, including Karidat social worker Lauri Ogumuro, Sister Stella Mangona of Holy Shephered, and sex trafficking victim Kayleen Entena, pushed strongly for the federalization of the CNMI.

Former U.S. negotiator for the CNMI-US Covenant Hadyn Williams also expressed his strong support for a federal immigration control in the CNMI.

REMITTANCES
FROM PAGE 1

Governor Amando Tetangco Jr. of the central bank, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas.

"The strength of remittances during the 11-month period may be attributed to the continued preference for Filipino workers by host countries and improved financial services made available by banks and other non-bank remittance channels," Tetangco said.

The remittances came mainly from the United States, the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Japan, Canada, Hong Kong, the United Arab Emirates, Singapore and Taiwan.

Citing preliminary data from the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration on new hires and rehires, Tetangco said the number of OFWs deployed from January to November reached 1.04 million, up 12.8 percent from the same months in 2005. Land-based workers increased 13.8 percent to 786,687 and sea-based workers, 9.8 percent to 250,447, he said.

"It is expected that the demand for Filipino workers will continue to be strong given the country's large pool of skilled and professional human resources," Tetangco said.

"Banks, meanwhile, continued to serve as efficient and preferred channels of remittance transfer due to their introduction of innovative financial services, such as Internet/on-line banking, phone banking, bills payment arrangements, as well as their competitive service fees and conversion rates," the BSP chief added.

Tetangco said banks, private remittance companies and other formal remittance agents were focused on setting up improved infrastructure mechanisms to increase the number of remittance centers and strengthen tie-ups abroad.

"These initiatives are expected to facilitate faster and easier transfer of remittances by OFWs to their beneficiaries," he said.

GUSTO
FROM PAGE 1

ness name Gusto Products, the husband-and-wife tandem developed two products that captivated the homesick Filipinos on the island—the Gusto Tocino and Gusto Longanisa.

Malou couldn't help but laugh about it now when she recalls their humble beginning, with just the two of them doing all the work, from grinding to packing the end products. She said her husband handled the grinding of the meat while she worked on the ingredients and packing.

She said she was inspired to venture into the business by her friend Libby Reyes, who provided her with an outstanding recipe on how to make tocino and longanisa.

She said she didn't hesitate to try it out and immediately conquered the kitchen and collected all the ingredients. When she finished her first few packs of the cured meat, she then distributed it to her friends, who eventually placed orders of the processed meat. Malou said her clientele grew and the couple finally decided to get serious with the business.

After a short successful beginning, the couple were advised by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to register and comply with the federal office's requirements on the sale of processed meats. The Mendozas then constructed an office and the processing areas for the tocino and longanisa to comply with the federal standards. From then on the couple has maintained its quality processing of "Gusto" products.

"We are the only USDA approved tocino and longanisa maker in the CNMI," said Malou, adding that every year USDA officials visit their facilities to ensure its cleanliness.

Lito said both of them couldn't believe the success of their little venture. He said the company would earn as much as $4,000 a week from the tocino and longanisa alone. He recalled that their major clients then were the garment factory employee barracks where it would order their processed meat wholesale.

In 1997, Gusto Products expanded and began selling peanuts. In 1999, another USDA approved product was added, the chicharon, a snack that's always a hit with the Filipino community.

Hard times

Malou said there have always been challenges in every business. Due to the current economic slump in the CNMI, their production has absolutely been affected. "We reduced our production because the purchasing power of the people have become less and less," she said.

At the same time, "Gusto" is competing with similar products that are imported and are being sold for a much lower price. She said their company couldn't afford to lower their prices because the cost of the ingredients they buy here and from off island are also high.

"We can't lower the price because we maintain the quality and we follow the federal standards," Malou said.

This, however, hasn't affected the couple's optimism. Lito said there would always be obstacles when starting and continuing a business. He said they couldn't just let the business go. "I am positive that the economy will pick up in the next few years. We can't afford to just let go of this. We have established a name already. We just have to wait and find the right time," he said.

"Gusto" Products will soon be distributed to the CNMI's neighboring islands such as Guam. Malou said she and her husband have thought of it for a long time since their products are USDA approved, which means they could be distributed anywhere in the US.

Malou said she is planning to distribute at least the Gusto Chicharon and Gusto Peanuts to Guam.

Advice to aspiring Pinoy entrepreneurs

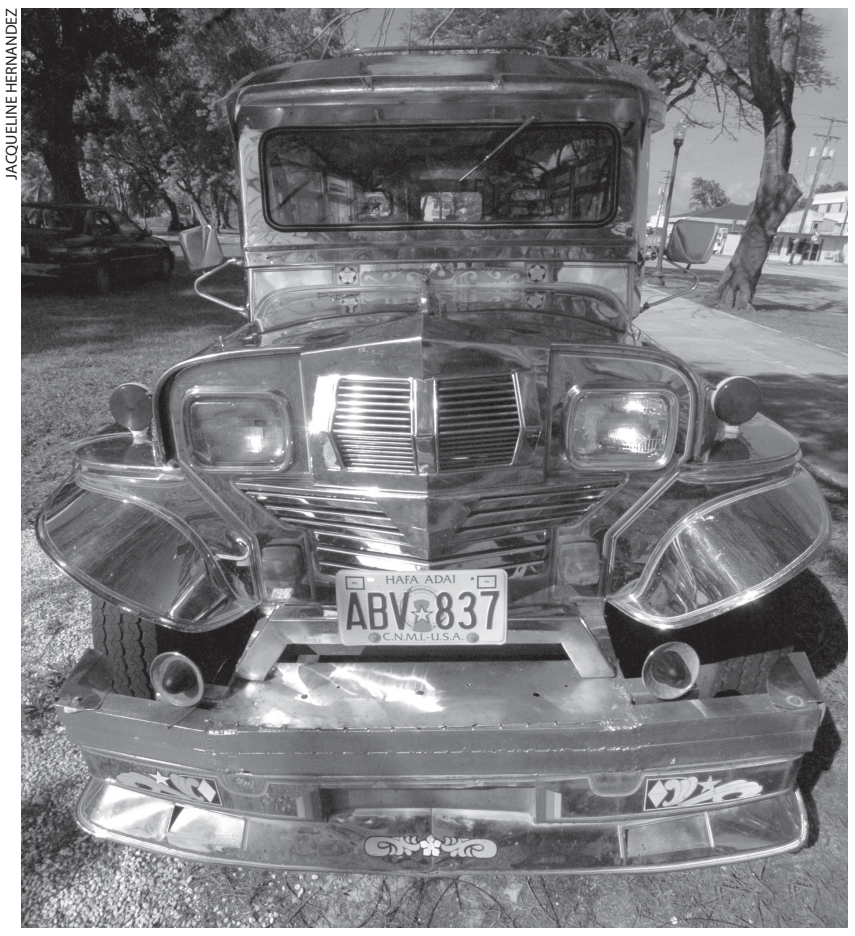
The couple said putting up a business is easy as long as the business owners have the passion and the industry to pursue it.

"All businesses start small. If you aim at something and you have a dream, go for it but with follow through," Lito said, adding that thorough research of the market is also the key to success.

In 1990, the couple established Tropex Garden and in 1997 the Traders Insurance Inc.

Rare jeepney on island on the block

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ



According to owner Bryan Kendall, the jeepney currently on display for sale at the Garapan Fishing Base is the only one running, out of the three or four shipped to Saipan years ago.

By AGNES E. DONATO
REPORTER

For almost a month now, a Philippine jeepney has become something of a fixture on Beach Road.

The cheapest form of transportation in the Philippines, jeepneys are a dime a dozen in Saipan's neighboring archipelago. They ply all the roads—from the superhighways to the narrowest alleys—at supersonic speed in all their bright and colorful glory.

But here they are a rarity, with only about a couple others of its kind on the island.

According to owner Bryan Kendall, the jeepney currently on display for sale at the Garapan Fishing Base is the only one running, out of the three or four shipped to Saipan years ago.

Kendall bought the jeepney from its previous owner a year ago with a mind to use it for business. The idea was to bring a little bit of their home country to the Filipinos on island—i.e. turn the jeepney into a mobile karaoke and indulge these music-loving people in their favorite pastime.

But the economy turned for the worse and Kendall had to opt for the practical. He decided to put up his mid-1980s model "Philippine Ferrari" for sale at $3,600.

"Now is just not the best time to put up a business that is dependent on pretty much the Filipino community. With everything going on, it doesn't look like the best of times, unfortunately. And I'd rather finish remodeling the house that I bought than have my jeepney sitting around on a wing and a prayer that the economy will get better soon. The sad truth of it is, yes, it is for sale," Kendall said.

He also said that anyone interested in his business idea is welcome to buy the entire karaoke package, including monitors, microphones, chips, and speakers, all for under $10,000.

Kendall can be reached at 671-898-7682.

'NCLEX coming to the Philippines'

By VERONICA UY
INQUIRER.NET

After more than two years of negotiations, the licensure test for foreign nurses seeking jobs in the United States, or the National Council on Licensure Examinations (NCLEX), is finally coming to the Philippines, an official said Friday.

"We will have the NCLEX here in the Philippines. We await final details from the negotiating team upon their arrival," Dean Marco Sto. Tomas, member of the Professional Regulations Commission's Board of Nursing.

Sto. Tomas was referring to a mission from the Commission on Filipinos Overseas, BON and the Philippine Nurses Association that went to the United States to negotiate to have the NCLEX administered here.

In a subsequent phone interview Sto. Tomas said every year, some 10,000 Filipino nurses take the exam, which is allowed only inside the United States or in places NCLEX officials decide are trustworthy.

Taking the exam often entails hefty travel and board expenses for Filipino nurses.

LABOR FRONT

Hearing officer's sanction, reconsideration

By FERDIE P. DE LA TORRE
REPORTER

Q: A restaurant alien worker had a problem with his passport. As a result, the employer filed the worker's renewal application 38 days after the prior work permit expired. Does the employer's renewal application for the worker has a chance to get Labor approval?

A: Yes. Renewal applications are required to be filed on or before the last day of the existing permit. According to the CNMI's Alien Labor Rules and Regulations, any applications filed beyond 30 days are denied, but the employer and the employee may appeal the denial to the Labor Administrative Hearing Office.

In a similar case, the Labor director denied an employer's application on the grounds that it was untimely filed. The parties appealed to the Administrative Hearing Office.

Hearing officer Jerry Cody reversed the Labor director's denial, but he imposed $220 sanction on the employer for the untimely filing.

■ ■ ■

Q: How does the Administrative Hearing Office compute the sanction?

A: The hearing officer may impose a graduated fee using the regulatory late fee of $5 per day for the first 30 days, with a stricter penalty for each day thereafter.

■ ■ ■

Q: What should an employer and an employee do to remove a sanction imposed against them by an administrative hearing officer, but that they believe should have not been done?

A: The employer and an employee may file a motion for reconsideration. The Labor Alien Rules and Regulations states that the hearing officer may relieve a party from a judgment, order or proceeding for the following reasons: a) Mistake, inadvertence, surprise, or excusable neglect; b) newly discovered evidence which by due diligence could not have been discovered in time to move into evidence at the hearing held in the matter; c) fraud, misrepresentation, or other misconduct of an adverse party; d) the judgment is void; e) the judgment has been satisfied, released or discharged…or it is no longer equitable that the judgment should have prospective application; or f) any other reason justifying relief from the operation of the judgment.

In a certain case, administrative hearing officer Jerry Cody granted a motion for reconsideration filed by an employer and an employee after determining that a document offered constitutes "newly discovered evidence which could not have been discovered" prior to the last hearing.

Submit questions on labor issues to Saipan Tribune *via e-mail at editor@saipantribune.com, or by calling 235-6397, 235-2440, or 235-8747 and leaving a message at Ext. 133 or 135. You may also submit questions in person by writing it down and dropping it off at the* Saipan Tribune*'s office on the second floor of the CIC Centre on Beach Road, Garapan.*

Firms tap singing-frenzy OFWs for biz expansion

By WILLIAM ALZONA and ISAGANI DE LA PAZ
WWW.OFWJOURNALISM.NET

MANILA—Boxer Manny Pacquiao's endorsement of a portable music-video microphone proves the Filipinos' penchant for singing and reflects the market is deep and wide.

But Butch Albarracin remains unimpressed. He says revenues from the domestic market are proving to be unreliable for his entertainment-focused business.

Albarracin, founder of the Center for Pop Music Philippines Inc., is setting his sights on eight million overseas Filipino workers who, despite temporarily or permanently living or working abroad, shares one dream: becoming the next big pop superstar.

Began in 1984, Center for Pop emerged as the country's top music training school, aiming to develop a curriculum to incubate the next superstars in the entertainment industry.

It has outlived other music training schools set up by other top musicians and composers in the country, after the Center, Alabarracin said, took the marketing part of the business seriously.

We balanced our focus on the music and selling the Center's services, he added.

That strategy paid well for Albarracin, who was recognized last month by a local marketing group for his success in medium-scale entrepreneurship.

Today, the music school has 21 branches and extension classes in about 20 schools in Metro Manila.

But instead of moving towards the provinces, Albarracin said he's more inclined to expand outside the country.

While he said he has received an offer from an investor in Daly City, California, Albarracin said he's setting the stage for entry in Hong Kong.

"If we can go there and teach them how to sing, they can contribute to the growth of the [Filipino] community [there]. They can have a skill, and they won't be shameful [of their jobs]," he added.

Sing-call

It is also in Hong Kong that publicly-listed Filipino firm Intellectual Property Ventures Group (Ipvg) Corp. found not only the next singing sensation but a unique market for its prepaid calling card.

Launched in July in Hong Kong, Ipvg partnered with HK-based IDT Corp. subsidiary IDT Telecom Inc. to search for a "Philippine Idol" version among an estimated 200,000 Filipinos in the former British colony.

The contest requires contestants to record their Filipino or English song entries –acapella, or with music accompaniment in the background– while using a prepaid calling card sold by IDT Asia.

Just recently, Ipvg announced from Manila the winner as Elvira Manacmul, 31, of Dinalupihan, Bataan, who bested four other finalists 17-year-old Elija Clave of Malasqui, Pangasinan; Irene Aquino, 33, of Cagayan Valley; and, Julie Ann Jereza, 25, of San Narciso, Zambales. All are living in HK when they joined the contest.

"They outperformed over 800 other participants who phoned in …to record their songs for the contest," IDT said. The recorded songs were played weekly in the Philippines Tonight Show on Metro Plus AM 1044 radio who also encouraged listeners to vote for their pick.

The firm said over-400,000 votes were cast by listeners in the five month period that ended in the Grand Finals January 28, 2007. The Ipvg statement said some 12,000 OFWs braved the chilly weather to view the creative side of the Filipino.

Manacmul was selected during the live radio broadcast performance at Chatter Road in Central Hong Kong where a panel of judges pushed up her share of the estimated hundred thousand votes that poured for the contestants.

Manacmul, a mother of two girls aged five- and seven-years old, would receive a recording contract with VIVA, a round-trip HK-Manila ticket, mobile phone, passes for two to Disneyland-HK, pre-paid call cards worth HK$500, and a "Magic Sing," the portable music-video player-microphone endorsed by Pacquiao.

While Ipvg's partnership with IDT Asia appears to be working, it is not envied by Albarracin.

"I am through with partnership. You end up fighting each other and one will go away with the money. That guy who will run away are usually those who are only after [the] money. Me, I cannot run because I'm a musician," he said.

License to sing

Albarracin, a voice coach, said to expand abroad, he must hurdle first the issue of whose license they will use: the singer's or theirs.

Either way, he said, it could be a cause of headache.

Using the singers' license abroad could be risky since it meant partnering with other parties, while having our own license to operate in other countries meant tons of documentary requirements, Albarracin explained.

Still, he's open to other arrangements.

"There's so many arrangement that we can do. One is either I go there as a businessman, or I go there as a speaker," Albarracin said citing it's easier to go the latter path.

"But I'm eyeing …a lasting relationship," he added.

Albarracin's plans and Ipvg's tack come at a time when the Philippine music industry's top revenue earners are few while others are still either catching the next flight to stardom or to other countries as solo or band entertainers.

But whether or not the plans of Albarracin and Ipvg –the firm is eyeing other countries– push through, they admit the OFW remains a good market.

"These are new markets. Sometimes people here (in the Philippines) have money, sometimes they have [none]. So we should have reserve sources of income," Albarracin said pointing to OFWs.

Ipvg spokesperson Eric Paragas was quoted in a newspaper report as saying the success of the singing tilt has led the firm to consider "holding the contest again in Hong Kong and/or other countries". ***(OFW Journalism Consortium)***

Plot to assassinate Erap exposed

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Communist rebels are plotting to assassinate several prominent Philippine political figures—including detained former President Joseph Estrada—to destabilize the government, National Security Adviser Norberto Gonzales said Thursday.

He said the alleged assassinations would be timed before upcoming elections, and the government would be blamed in an attempt to damage its chances in the polls.

Gonzales, a committed anti-communist, identified the alleged targets as himself, Estrada and the former president's children.

Estrada still has strong support among the Philippine poor and is considered the leader of the political opposition. His wife and a son are opposition senators, and another son is a town mayor.

"There are reports that the communists would want to assassinate a few important personalities which unfortunately includes me," Gonzales told reporters.

"They want to blame the government for whatever will happen to (former) President Estrada or his children," he added.

Estrada's spokesman, Rufus Rodriguez, dismissed Gonzales' information as just "a product of his imagination." He said political motives may be behind the announcement of the alleged plot.

Estrada, who is being held by the government at his vacation house in Tanay town, east of Manila, is accused of amassing about 4 billion pesos (US$82.6 million; €63.6 million) in payoffs from illegal gambling operations, tobacco tax kickbacks and commissions.

He has denied any wrongdoing and accused his successor, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, of conspiring with the country's elite, Roman Catholic church leaders and some senior military officers to oust him in 2001.

AP

PLANE CRASH
Philippine Coast Guard and other rescuers approach a twin-engine Britain-Norman Islander aircraft shortly after it crash-landed in the shallow waters off Mactan Island in Cebu province, after its engine apparently malfunctioned, Wednesday Feb. 7, 2007, in central Philippines. All six people aboard the plane, including the pilot, were shaken but unhurt, officials said.

Bacoor mayor padlocks police stations in protest

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—A Philippine mayor closed all police stations in his town and seized patrol cars to protest a purported plan to revamp local law enforcement, officials said Thursday.

Mayor Jessie Castillo of Cavite province's Bacoor town, south of Manila, ordered the main police station and about five other detachments padlocked late Wednesday to prevent changes that he claimed were orchestrated by a rival politician intruding into his town's affairs.

Television footage showed locked-out police officers pounding on typewriters and doing other desk work under a tarpaulin as amused passers-by gawked at them.

Castillo claims Sen. Ramon Revilla Jr. wants to bring in a new police force to bolster the political fortunes of the lawmaker's brother, who will run for mayor of Bacoor in the May 14 congressional and local elections.

Revilla denied the allegations.

Castillo ordered the reopening of all police stations Thursday after an emergency meeting with officials, according to Jonvic Remulla, Cavite's governor.

National government officials earlier condemned Castillo's action and warned he could face criminal charges if the police stations were not reopened.

Interior and Local Governments Undersecretary Wenceslao Andanar said Castillo, a pro-administration official, had no authority to disrupt crucial police services.

Castillo helped President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo win in his town in the 2004 elections, "but that should not give him a license to become a petty tyrant," Andanar told DZBB radio.

Provincial police officials sent additional officers, a number of patrol cars and motorcycles to help watch the town during the tense standoff.

IMF sees RP '07 growth at 5.8%

MANILA, Philippines—The International Monetary Fund expects the Philippine economy to grow at a faster pace of 5.8 percent this year, reflecting improved investor confidence following fiscal reforms, but it said it was still worried about the large public debt.

The country's gross domestic product grew 5.4 percent in 2006, compared with the IMF's forecast of 5.5 percent.

"Public debt remains sensitive to rollover and exchange rate risks, and external commercial borrowing requirements, while declining, are still significant," the IMF said in a statement following a regular consultation with Philippine authorities.

It urged the government to sustain the reform momentum to maintain market confidence. "Impressive fiscal reforms in an environment of sustained growth and declining inflation have strengthened market confidence in the Philippines," it said.

The GDP growth could be stronger over the medium term if more reforms are done to reduce public debt more sustainably, the IMF said.

"Continued reforms are also necessary to boost investment and growth and accelerate progress in reducing poverty," it added.

The main downside risks to the outlook were a renewed surge in oil prices, a slowdown in the global economy, and a sudden reversal in global risk appetite, the IMF said.

In December, the central bank paid in full $219.7 million in outstanding obligations to the IMF, which triggered the Philippines' exit from a post-program monitoring arrangement with the Fund at the end of 2006. ***(INQUIRER.net)***

Troops clash with rebels, killing 3

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—Army troops in the eastern Philippines have clashed with communist rebels, killing three guerrillas, police said Thursday.

Soldiers were on patrol in Buhi town in Camarines Sur province, about 300 kilometers (185 miles) southeast of Manila, when fighting erupted at dawn Wednesday, said regional police director Chief Superintendent Ricardo Padilla.

Troops later recovered the bodies of three rebels with weapons and ammunition. There were no casualties on the government side, Padilla said.

The Philippine military says it is winning a campaign against a 38-year-old Maoist insurgency, and predicted the uprising would be finished off by 2010.

The rebel New People's Army has been included on U.S. and European terrorist lists.

The rebels quit peace talks in 2004, accusing the Philippine government of instigating their inclusion on the terror lists and refusing to have them removed.

RP offers help to Indonesia, neighbors hit by bird flu

By TERESA CEROJANO
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

MANILA, Philippines (AP)—The Philippines is sending a high-level team to Indonesia to offer its neighbor help as it battles a bird flu virus outbreak, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said Thursday.

Arroyo is dispatching Agriculture Secretary Arthur Yap and Efren Abu, an envoy to an East Asian growth area that includes Indonesia, to Jakarta to call on Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

"The Indonesians helped us so much, so we have offered to help them," Arroyo told reporters. "We're very proud we do not have bird flu and we want to help our neighbors who will accept our help."

She said bird flu was a transnational problem and any help extended to the country's neighbors would also help the Philippines.

But the date of the visit and what help will be offered were not clear.

Samuel Animas, the task force official from the Bureau of Animal Industry, said a team he headed already visited Indonesia last month to offer technical assistance.

"We have a good program, the avian influenza protection program which we shared to them," he said. Among measures discussed were the Philippines' ban on duck movement during migration periods and the order for local officials to quarantine fowl right away if bird flu is detected.

But Animas said the Philippines is also short on what Indonesia badly needs now—money to pay farmers to slaughter infected birds, and vaccines.

Yap said the Philippines was opening a laboratory next month north of Manila that will have testing equipment and emergency vaccines for poultry for immediate action if bird flu is detected in the country.

The laboratory in Pampanga province, funded by New Zealand, would be near the biggest bird sanctuary in the country—the Candaba swamp—and would boost programs already in place for surveillance of domestic fowl in the wetlands, Animas said.

The deadly H5N1 virus has killed or prompted the slaughter of millions of birds worldwide since late 2003, when it began ravaging Asian poultry stocks. As of February 5, it has killed 165 people worldwide, including 63 in Indonesia, the World Health Organization said.

The virus remains essentially an animal disease, but experts fear the virus may mutate into a form easily spreadable between humans and trigger a global pandemic, possibly killing millions.

DoLE to recruiters: Collect fees from foreign employers

By JEROME ANING
INQUIRER

MANILA—Collect placement fees from foreign employers and not from your countrymen applying as domestic helpers.

Labor Secretary Arturo Brion has this piece of advice to recruitment agencies fearing financial ruin after the government issued stricter regulations on the deployment of domestics, including the scrapping of the payment of placement fees, amounting up to a month's salary by the recruit.

"We're not forbidding you from collecting fees, but you may collect them from your principals. This is for the sake of our fellow Filipinos, our overseas working Filipino women to whom we are extending due protection," the labor secretary said Thursday in a statement.

Brion insisted that the new reform package enforcing better conditions for domestics—called household service workers by the labor department—would spur proper and legitimate recruitment for global jobs.

Just can't get enough of KC Concepcion

By DOLLY ANNE CARVAJAL
INQUIRER

Sharon Cuneta seemed irked when she was interviewed by "S-Files" regarding the picture of her daughter KC Concepcion and TV director Lino Cayetano (taken in Hong Kong) that came out in this column last week.

Sharon Cuneta

I respect Mega's feelings. As a mom, I'm also protective of my kids. But since my son IC is in show biz, I have accepted the fact that it's beyond my control when people take pictures of him with a date—and it lands in the papers. KC may not be actively in show biz but she's a celebrity, like it or not, with all those commercials she has made.

When a reader e-mailed me the picture, I got excited and wanted to share it with everybody. Nobody can seem to get enough of KC. She really is hot property.

The same reader (Kace Cayetano—pure coincidence) have not sent me these pictures of KC and Lino taken at the wedding reception for friends of KC's last Jan. 13 at Sofitel Philippine Plaza. It is my only hope that Shawie won't take it against me. Just as she picks out wonderful songs for her repertoire, I also have to choose interesting subjects/pics for my column.

I am eternally grateful to Sha for all the help she selflessly extended during my ma's ICU days and my darkest hours. But that's a different story. Knowing Sha, she wouldn't want to make a big fuss about that.

She's that kind-hearted.

I hope that very same heart will forgive me for jumping at the sight of KC's pictures with Lino and eagerly printing them here. Why deprive the public the vicarious joy of watching a romance blossom especially this Valentine week?

FYI (For Your Indulgence)

When TJ Manotoc introduced me to his brother Borgy, he (Borgy) seemed so mild-mannered. Thus, it's quite appalling to hear all sorts of stories about his war-freak tendencies.

Borgy's latest tiff was with Bong Alvarez at Embassy club. Bong allegedly mistook Borgy's GF Ornussa Cadness for a waitress and this did not sit too well with Borgy. How condescending! What's wrong with being in the service crew, anyway?

Borgy is so used to having things served on a silver platter. He should also try to look at the other side of the table.

■ Alfred Vargas and LJ Reyes insist they are in a "cool-off" period. But they were seen together watching "Peter Pan" at the CCP. Maybe, just like Peter who refuses to grow up, they can't outgrow their fondness for each other.

■ Is Vina Morales' boyfriend, C.L. married, divorced or on the verge of filing for annulment? Could it be true that Vina had an unpleasant encounter with his (ex?) wife? It's quite tricky when you can't tell if you're the cause or the effect of a separation.

■ Angel Locsin's manager Becky Aguila sent me this text: "I wanna clear up the issue that came out in the tabs. Angel and I have patched up our differences. She also kissed and made up with my twins last Dec. 27. Angel will formally withdraw the case against me. We were separated for a year and a half. We're making up for lost time." It's good that even if Angel is flying high, her "wings" still lead her back to Becky.

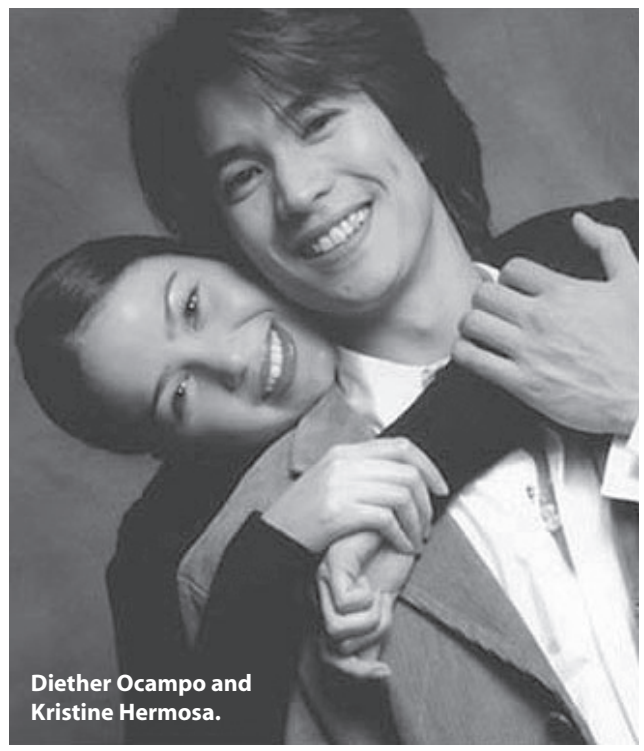
■ This actress/TV host has been through it all in the name of love. And just when she thought she has found Mr. Right, it seems fate is playing tricks on her again.

Her beloved is said to be having a dangerous liaison with a pretty facialist. No wonder he frequents the skin care center while his wife is busy working. "Private cleaning sessions"—or are they up to something dirty? Do her services include clearing his conscience?

■ Carlo Aquino has a big crush on Bianca King. Just like his ex, Angelica Panganiban, Bianca was on the centerfold of a men's mag. He craves curves! He's dying to meet Bianca. But they work for rival networks. Will he be the king of her heart?

■ Sandara Park arrived hours late for the contract signing of a TV project, making senior stars Eddie Garcia, Ronaldo Valdez and Dexter Doria wait. Though irked, Tito Eddie and company kept cool. She'd better not be tardy during tapings, lest everything in her career follow suit—then it will be too late.

■ Diether Ocampo says his relationship with Kristine Hermosa has entered a new phase. "We'd rather not label it—we're letting each other grow." He's not bothered by persistent rumors linking Kristine to Oyo Boy Sotto, saying, "I believe what she says that they are just close." Love must be deaf, too, and not just blind sometimes.


Diether Ocampo and Kristine Hermosa.

Mega Valentine

On Feb. 10, 8 p.m. at the Big Dome, Sharon Cuneta gives in to fans' clamor by mounting the sequel of her awesome V-day concert last year ("My Mega Valentine 2"). Her guests: Pops Fernandez and the Apo Hiking Society.

Songs from Sharon's triple platinum "Isn't It Romantic?" album (Sony BMG) will be part of the repertoire.

And how's Shawie's heart now? As a mom, she'd rather let KC's love life blossom quietly, saying, "Some things are better left private". As the Megastar, she is not too keen about Sarah Geronimo, or any young star for that matter, doing a remake of "Dear Heart."

"If the stars don't look like Gabby and me, they will just pale in comparison," she says. "That movie is like my baby. I plan to buy the master negative."

Sha has every reason to be protective of her "babies." But when it comes to her music, it's all for the taking at her concert.

'Lil Big Superstar'

ABS-CBN launches "Little Big Superstar," the newest search for the next top child performer, on Feb. 10 at 5 p.m. "Super Inggo" Makisig Morales, who won in Season 1, hosts the show with Sarah Geronimo. Will they find a lil "Marilag" to pair with Makisig?

'Love to Laugh'

I asked Ogie Alcasid and Ai-Ai de las Alas the funniest thing they did for love. Ogie said, "When I was 15, I had to make my voice sound like a girl because my GF's parents were so strict. Then one time, my voice cracked!" As for Ai: "Noong baliw na baliw ako sa pag-ibig, muntik akong ihulog sa building ng BF ko kasi sobra akong magselos!"

Friends sing for Ely Buendia

By POCHOLO CONCEPCION
INQUIRER

Weeks before suffering a heart attack, Ely Buendia was said to be "depressed."

The 35-year-old former leader of the country's biggest and most influential band reportedly felt so isolated, he blurted out one night after a gig with his new group Pupil at Eastwood City in Libis, Quezon City: "Where have all my friends gone?"

Eastwood City would be the same venue of "LivEly"—a hastily prepared concert held Jan. 28 to help Ely defray hospital bills and other medical expenses.

The organizers included former Eraserheads road manager Julie Pacanas, Shirley Asignacion-Elgar (Buendia's ex, now married to Rivermaya guitarist Mike Elgar), '70s Bistro manager Renard Bartolome, MTV Philippines PR officer Lizette Claudio, DJs of FM radio station DWTM 89.9 and others who came together as concerned friends volunteering their services.

The motley lineup consisted of Chicosci, Ciudad, Dicta License, FrancisM, Itchyworms, Join the Club, Julianne, Kamikazee, Kitchie Nadal, Makatha, Moonstar 88, Oppressed, Paramita, Parokya ni Edgar, Rivermaya, Rocksteddy, Salindiwa, Sponge Cola, Swissy, True Faith and Up Dharma Down.

Former E-heads lead guitarist Marcus Adoro made a surprise appearance as the last performer.

The bands played three songs each and then went down the stage to approach the Sunday crowd with donation boxes.

Some P70,000 was raised, with the artists themselves pledging more.

Backstage, the vibe was relaxed. "Walang rock 'star'," Bartolome observed. "Everybody is waiting patiently for their turn to play."

A few talked about their relationship with Buendia and the E-heads.

"To me he is a kuya," Itchyworms vocalist-guitarist Jugs Jugueta said. "Not only did the Eraserheads influence my band's music; they even helped us record our first demo in Ely's home studio. The E-heads also got us to open their gigs."

"We were pretty close in the 1990s and hung out a lot," True Faith front man Medwyn Marfil recounted. "I know Ely's brothers and sisters because I lived in Parañaque which was near their place in Las Piñas. But mainly I was a big fan, even when I was already with True Faith. I'm the type who would profess love for music that I admire. Ely's music was tops, very artistic."

Ely Buendia

ABS-CBN's Ricky Lee and Joyce Bernal were roaming around, coordinating with volunteers distributing the collection boxes.

"Estudyante ko si Ely noong nagtuturo pa ko sa UP," Lee explained. "Nakasama ko siya ... sa grupong Cineastes. Hindi pa malaman ni Ely noon kung ano talaga ang gusto niyang gawin sa dami ng talent niya. Kinuha ko siyang assistant, taga-research, kasama sa workshops ko sa bahay. I remember gusto niyang iparinig sa amin yung demo songs niya ... wala pang pumapansin. Pero alam ko malalim siyang tao at seryoso. Kahit nga naglalaro yan ng video game, sobrang seryoso."

According to FrancisM, Buendia was playing Tekken, an exciting computer game, when he first felt chest pains while on the road to a Pupil gig in Laguna.

However, friends believe the heart attack was the result of a buildup of stress from more serious physical and emotional factors.

What could have caused that outburst in Eastwood?

One theory involves an incident where Diane Ventura, Ely's live-in partner and one of two managers, allegedly doused water on the owner of Big Sky Mind, an art gallery-music joint in Quezon City, which led to the banning of Pupil from the establishment.

At the fundraiser, some of the participating bands were said to have made one request: that Ventura should not show up.

Also, it looks like Buendia still has to mend some fences, especially with his former band mates. There was talk that E-heads drummer, now Sandwich front man, Raimund Marasigan is still smarting from the way Buendia broke up the band via text message. Marasigan didn't bother replying to the invitation to play at "LivEly."

Oh well, as the Stones loved to say, "It's only rock 'n' roll…"

FrancisM is holding his own fundraiser for Ely on Feb. 24 at Zirkoh, Timog, Quezon City featuring various artists. Meanwhile, Ely himself is slated to perform Feb. 23 at Star Mall in Las Piñas to raise funds—for a school!

Two 'Les Miserables' leads are Fil-Am

By Carissa Villacorta
INQUIRER.NET

In 1991, 15 years ago, the 11-year-old me wrote her first published article, "My Encounter with Lea Salonga in New York" during a brief first visit to Broadway.

Now at 27, and actually living in New York, my encounters with Filipino theater artists on Broadway are frequent, and I'm no longer star struck by the bright lights and celebrity. In the past five years, down-to-earth, humble and gracious Filipino talents have not only become a prevalent presence on Broadway, but friends simply going after their dreams.

When Les Mis re-opened on Broadway in November 2006, it gave Filipinos in New York a greater reason to catch this limited run: to witness young Filipino Americans Adam Jacobs and Ali Ewoldt take the stage wonderfully, playing the hopeful lovers Marius and Cosette. I saw it twice in two weeks, and will not tire of seeing Ali and Adam give vigor to their roles. They make all Filipinos in the audience beam with pride.

More importantly, how they are offstage deserves our pride.

When you see Adam Jacobs walk regally into a room, you'd think he was the prince he played for Cinderella's national US tour (after fellow Filipino Paolo Montalban). But in truth? He's a goofball who loves reading and rollerblading ("Not at the same time!"), exuding more of the charm than the rigidity of royalty. Adam now captivates audiences in New York's Broadhurst Theater.

Ali Ewoldt, 25, keeps the qualities of Cosette off-stage. With lovely curly hair and an endearing smile, her ways are low-key, but her sweet countenance irradiates the room. This bright beauty, who's also played Maria in West Side Story, recently graduated cum laude with a degree in Psychology from Yale University.

Filipino Mafia

"Ali and I have had the pleasure of working with each other prior to the Broadway production of Les Mis, while on its national tour. She joined as an ensemble member a while after I did (as Marius). I remember being happily surprised to learn that she was Fil Am just like me. When we first met, she seemed very sweet and soft-spoken. I honestly didn't think they would need to wig her for the show, because she already had that beautiful dark curly hair which all the Cosettes must have, but they still did use a wig. Go figure!" Adam exclaimed.

"Adam is wonderful to work with. He always takes his role very seriously, until something silly happens, like he stumbles over a line and just the glimmer of mischief in his eyes is enough to make me start to laugh and then he begins as well. Basically, as far as keeping a straight face on stage, we are horrible influences on each other," Ali shared.

Soon after Ali joined, Joan Almadilla, another Filipina who was playing the role of Fantine, coined the phrase "Filipino Mafia" to describe their group—and it stuck. "To this day, Ali and I say this phrase to each other for a little uplifting cultural affirmation," Adam added.

NEIL VILLANUEVA

Fil Americans Ali Ewoldt and Adam Jacobs play the hopeful lovers Marius and Cosette in another Broadway production of Les Mis, the longest-running musical in the world.

Meeting fellow Filipino artists

Adam and Paolo Montalban talked at the opening night party of Cinderella in Pennsylvania. "I told him how proud I was that he was up there representing. I think I used the phrase 'Pinoy Power'!" Adam was part of another production in the same state then, not knowing he would play the role of the prince after Paolo.

Ali met her childhood idol, Deedee Magno Hall, at her first professional theater job "Aladdin" in Disneyland. "I remember watching her on the Mickey Mouse Club, knowing she was Filipina and gaining hope that one day I could perform too. The experience of working with her was of course made even greater by her professionalism, kindness, and generosity. The first time I did a dress rehearsal as Jasmine - I felt completely unprepared and unsure. Deedee and two other Filipinas took me under their wing, walking me through the whole process and calling themselves my 'Filipino aunties.'

"Having grown up not knowing other Filipinos (except for my family), it was an amazing experience of cultural unity and just human kindness. I was truly touched."

Dreaming the life, living the dream

"To achieve this relatively quickly and in such an amazing show as 'Les Miserables,' the first show I memorized as a kid, is spectacular to me. I feel so lucky to have this role in this show and to perform for wonderful audiences every night

"It has been my dream to make it to Broadway, and having finally reached that milestone, I feel like all the time, effort and money have paid off," Ali gushed.

Adam adds, "Being in 'Les Miserables' now is the culmination of years of working and dreaming, and I am so grateful to be a part of it!"

Fifteen years later, I stood by the stage door again. Now, however, Ali and Adam meet me with warm hugs and great big smiles. And after hours of great conversation, I know they're that way too with their many fans and friends, whoever they may be. These Filipino Americans on Broadway are as happy to see us as we are to see them—on stage and off. They know that the show (and the job) is fleeting, and they remain humble, helpful, and thankful—always.

Les Miserables came back to Broadway in celebration of its becoming the longest-running musical in the world in October 2006. Due to popular demand, its original six-month limited run was extended till the 2007 summer theatre season in New York.

Carmi Martin, designing woman

By BAYANI SAN DIEGO JR.
INQUIRER

Her home tells a story of inspiration, says actress-interior designer Carmi Martin.

She has been living here since 1988, though she had to leave it for three years till 2003 while she was enrolled at the Philippine School of Interior Design.

Show biz had gone into a slump at the time. "I had no steady income from acting," she recalls. "I decided to rent out this place and move to a smaller one near the school."

In fact, she was reinventing herself, pursuing a long-cherished dream.

"My good friend (actress-comedian) Tessie Tomas encouraged me to take up design. Whenever I threw parties at home, my guests always complimented the interiors," she recounts.

"Minimalist" is how she describes her personal style.

"I hate loud colors. I'm also partial to indigenous materials, like abaca," she explains.

Adorned with paintings, her home looks like a mini-art gallery.

There are a series of still lifes by Mauro "Malang" Santos and abstracts by Gerry Ingco.

In the living room is a gift from artist Ivan Acuña. In the foyer is a "Mother and Child" piece that she had won in a CBN Asia raffle.

In the upstairs hallway is Carmi's life-size portrait by Isabel Diaz. "I've always admired her because her works are cool and casual," Carmi notes.

She says she advises clients to "invest" in art by renowned painters: "Paintings add a burst of colors to the house, and appreciate in value."

She is busier as interior designer than as actress these days. She's currently in the cast of the new GMA 7 series "Magic Kamison," but she has four design projects ongoing.

"I am working on a resort (Canyon Ranch in Cavite). Neighbors asked me to do modern and Mediterranean designs for their apartments. A client in Manila wanted a contemporary style for a condo unit," she says. "I can adjust to suit my clients' personalities and preferences."

For sexy actress Rufa Mae Quinto's den and dressing room, for instance, Carmi whipped up a pop art and "Hollywood" look. (Her designs are posted on her Web site, www.martininteriorsph.com.)

Carmi works on her designs in her office, which also serves as a guest room.

"More than the money," she says, beaming, "the best reward is when clients thank me for beautifying their homes."

But Carmi's dream project is to work on a resort abroad that will feature Philippine materials and murals and frescoes by Pinoys—"a great way to promote the country."

Ryan still hurts over split from Reese

By RUBEN V. NEPALES
INQUIRER

LOS ANGELES—"What is on my mind right now is the heartache and my children, but I'll persevere," Ryan Phillippe said of his separation from Reese Witherspoon in a recent press conference at the Four Seasons Hotel.

Ryan was speaking to journalists to promote his new film "Breach," a dramatic thriller where he acts well opposite respected thespians Chris Cooper and Laura Linney.

Responding to a writer's question if it was fair to ask him about his pending divorce from the Oscar and Golden Globe winning actress, Ryan said, "It's fair to ask, man. I wouldn't divulge super personal stuff but I would say, you know, it's up and down. It's the most difficult time in my life. I realize what's at stake is my children's welfare and happiness so that's the priority right now."

The actor added, "It's funny—here I am promoting a movie and people are saying, oh, his movie is great and his career is going well. It's the last thing on my mind right now. I love this movie. I love what I do ... You want to talk about working with a great actor like Chris Cooper and what I think of his performance, but it's difficult."

The 32-year-old father of Ava, 7, and Deacon, 3, his kids with Reese, continued, "What is on my mind right now is the heartache and my children but I'll persevere. People go through it, you know. I'm certainly not the first, won't be the last and that doesn't make it any easier. But there are reasons to keep on going, right?"

On whether the media was fair by identifying Australian actress, Abbie Cornish, as his alleged partner in a reported affair that infuriated Reese, the star of the Oscar-winning "Crash" and "Flags of our Fathers" stated, "Not (fair) at all but so much of what is done in the media is not fair to any of us and it's really beyond our control. You can waste a ton of energy trying to counteract it or whatever it is that made you feel slighted but you really have no control over it. You sign up for this life to some degree. If you don't want it, there are ways to get out. It's not the Mafia. If you're done with it and you're tired of it, move on. So things like that are unfair but it's just a part of this business."

Asked if an acting couple's relationship can be affected by competition (one of the reported reasons of his and Reese's estrangement), Ryan commented, "I can't speak for other people. I know that's not a part of who I am. I am not a competitive person and although I do have ambition and drive, there are many things far more important in life to me than movies. So I guess I don't really feel like that applies to my life. I mean, I imagine people would put that sort of pressure and focus on Reese and my relationship but I was always proud of her success."

OPINYON

There oughta be a law

There's The Rub
By CONRADO DE QUIROS
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

I always make out in talks, whenever a question about corruption is raised, that there's a fundamental difference between our corruption and that of other Asian countries. It's not that ours is bigger. Other Asian countries, or closer to home, Southeast Asian ones, have more astronomical levels of corruption. Transparency International lists Ferdinand Marcos only second among the all-time crooks of Asia. The dubious honor of being first belongs to Indonesia's Suharto. Marcos stole "only" $15 billion, Suharto stole $35 billion.

But you look at Indonesia and the Philippines today, and you are going to weep only for the Philippines. Indonesia hasn't quite reached such levels of desperation that it has to export its people wholesale to survive. That's not simply explained by the fact that Indonesia is bigger and richer and can tolerate higher levels of pillage.

Quite simply, though Suharto stole more, he never took the money out of Indonesia. He plunked his loot in all sorts of businesses there, big and small, multimillion and penny-ante. Marcos stashed his loot abroad, in Swiss and other banks. At the end of the day, Suharto remained in Indonesia, ready to face, or buy off, his detractors. At the end of the day, Marcos fled to Hawaii to enjoy the bitter fruit of his murderous labor, such as he could with lupus and Imelda, whichever made living more unbearable.

That is the difference between corruption here and other Asian countries, which explains the abject state we're in. Other Asian countries at least have patriotic crooks; we have treacherous ones. The blood money of other Asian tyrants go on to employ the citizens of their country; the blood money of local ones go on to employ only a few Filipino maids and chauffeurs in America.

That was the first thing I thought of when I read about this business of Mike Arroyo signing a waiver allowing the HypoVereinsbank in Munich to divulge his accounts, if any, to the ethics committee of the House of Representatives. He did this to counter Alan Peter Cayetano's allegations that he held accounts there and apparently to comply with the lawmaker's demand for him to sign a waiver to ascertain it. Cayetano is unimpressed by the gesture and says that is not exactly, or entirely, what he is asking for. What he is asking for is a waiver that will free not just this particular bank in Munich but all foreign banks to reveal the First Gentleman's deposits upon request by Philippine authorities. What he was trying to determine, Cayetano said, was whether there existed "a pattern of corruption and money-laundering by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and members of the First Family."

I leave others to debate the question of who has scored the more points in this latest round of the ongoing bout between Arroyo and Cayetano. My point is simply this: Why should signing a waiver allowing foreign banks to disclose the deposits of Filipino public officials—and their families—upon request of Philippine authorities be voluntary or optional? Why should it be done out of the goodness of one's heart? Why shouldn't it be compulsory or a requisite of public office? Why shouldn't that be something candidates explicitly or implicitly agree to when they run for any position in this country, from barangay councilor to president?

Frankly, I don't know why no representative or senator has yet filed that as an urgent bill. Henceforth, every Filipino official, elected or appointed, agrees to have his assets abroad scrutinized without legal impediment from him. Or more to the point, henceforth every Filipino official, elected or appointed, agrees to waive his right to secrecy in bank deposits abroad. That should be written in the oath of office public officials must swear to before they occupy their positions. Which, of course, should apply to the members of their immediate families as well. For obvious reasons: A public official's loot may not be laundered by his or her spouse or children.

The logic is simple: At the very least, even if those deposits are well-gotten (although the notion that Filipino officials could possibly harbor legitimate wealth in Swiss and other banks is about as believable as the notion of military intelligence or Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's capacity for honesty), what is a Filipino public official doing not using that money to improve the lot of those he professes to serve? At the very most, if those deposits are ill-gotten -- which they almost axiomatically are, notably where they carry the name "Jose Pidal" or variations thereof -- then their depositors should be shot by firing squad in, well, not in Bagumbayan, that would be sacrilege. Those deposits do not just represent corruption, they represent treason. Those deposits do not just represent a betrayal of public trust, they represent a betrayal of the nation.

We have a proposed anti-terror bill that proposes to terrorize the citizens by freezing the bank deposits of suspected terrorists. Why can't we have a saner anti-corruption and anti-treason bill that simply obliges public officials to disclose their deposits in foreign banks by waiving their right to secrecy there? What can be more a matter of national security than preventing the remaining wealth of this already much ransacked country from being smuggled outside and frittered away by crooked traitors or treacherous crooks? What can be higher treason than plucking food from the mouth of the hungry to bet on Manny Pacquiao's fights? What can be a worse act of terrorism than planting a bomb at the heart of this country's survival?

Will Mike Arroyo sign a waiver allowing all foreign banks to disclose any deposits he might have made with them? That shouldn't be a matter of choice, that should be a matter of course. By God, by law and by golly.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Queries for Ombudsman

Ombudsman Merceditas Gutierrez is intelligent, except that she is unable to distinguish right from wrong. She single-handedly convicted Gov. Niel D. Tupas Sr. and Sangguniang Panlalawigan members Domingo Oso Jr. and Cecilia Capodosa of Iloilo province for grave misconduct, and ordered them immediately kicked out of service. She kept the decision (dated Dec. 4, 2006) a top secret but immediately executory upon receipt by Interior and Local Government Secretary Ronaldo Puno, who in turn "served" and implemented it on Jan. 15—the very day and the first time that Tupas et al. came to know of it.

Among the first persons to be shocked was Msgr. Meliton Oso, the complainant himself. "Why was I not furnished the copy of the decision? The complaint was filed and processed in Cebu, how come it was the Ombudsman herself and not her deputy in Cebu who made the decision?" he asked. When the cleric called up the deputy ombudsman in Cebu to ask for the original copy, he heard her muttering in surprise: "Hindi ko alam 'yan, ah."

In the morning of Jan. 16, two lawyers of Tupas flew to Cebu to file a petition for certiorari with the Court of Appeals; but without the original copies of the decision, their pleadings were but a scrap of paper. They went to the Office of the Deputy Ombudsman to authenticate their photocopies, but the latter could not certify them because it had no original in its file.

The Office of the Ombudsman finally sent the original copies to Cebu past office hours of Jan. 16; so Tupas' counsels were able to file the petition for certiorari only at 10 a.m. of Jan 17.

In the meantime, 300 fully armed hoodlums in police ranger uniforms, backed with an armored personnel carrier, fire trucks and four snipers on the ground raided the Iloilo provincial capitol to flush out Tupas. The armed hoodlums smashed four panels of the glass door with a sledge hammer, roughed up unarmed civilians, including four children of Tupas, and terrorized civilians and reporters by training their assault rifles and barking threats at them.

Though it ended "well" without bloodshed, more questions beg for answers. Why did Gutierrez ignore established jurisprudence—notably the ruling in Ombudsman vs Pendatun Laja et al. that its decision of dismissal or suspension of more than one month is final and executory only after 10 days when the respondent fails to file a motion for reconsideration or appeal; that the timely filing of a motion for reconsideration or appeal stays the execution of the penalties? Gutierrez cannot plead ignorance; no less than the Ombudsman herself is the petitioner here and the Court issued the decision only on May 22, 2006.

Why did Gutierrez rule that her decision was immediately executory "upon receipt" by the Department of Interior and Local Government? Why were Tupas et al. not served the original copies of the decisions, a vital element in determining the 10-day period to file a motion for reconsideration or in the filing of an appeal or petition for certiorari?

Pet Melliza
via e-mail

Missing the overseas vote

The Long View
By MANUEL L. QUEZON III
PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Recently the Inquirer reported that around 1,000 domestic helpers and their recruiters held a rally in front of the Philippines' Department of Labor and Employment. The protesters, organized by a consortium of 700 recruitment agencies, "aired their objections to the raising of the maids' minimum wage to $400, the setting of the minimum age at 25, and mandatory training for all applicants." It's not the first time that Filipinos wanting to work abroad have had to rally to air their grievances. A couple of years ago, even before the Japanese government—under American pressure—moved to impose limits on Filipino entertainers going to Japan, once-and-future Japayukis rallied in front of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (Tesda), which had announced it was requiring stricter regulations for the issuance of the coveted (because necessary for departure) artists record book (ARB) certificates.

That the rally represented the flexing of what should be the overseas Filipino worker's political muscle is devoutly to be wished. But so far, aside from the periodic junkets of Filipino politicians (more for local consumption, to reassure relatives at home that their breadwinners are getting attention abroad), only the Philippine Left has tried to organize overseas Filipinos on a systematic basis.

Juan Mercado, on the same day the protest story came out, observed in his column that "Filipino overseas workers bought a quarter of the lots sold by big real estate firms in 2006, up from 15 percent last year." Besides the many jobs—in sales, advertising, management, construction and so on—such investments create, they have many other significant, and political, benefits for the country.

The OFW who finally buys a home not only obtains security for his family but also gains a tremendous incentive to ensure that his home somehow increases in value—which will only happen if neighborhoods are safe, municipalities are better-run and so on down the line. At present, the immense number of Filipinos living illegally on other people's land makes them pawns in the hands of candidates who can threaten them with expulsion, or coddle them in exchange for votes—one reason Gawad Kalinga has the potential of making a revolutionary impact.

I've felt for some time that this new, emerging middle class can radically transform society and government. But it has to realize, as a whole, something a growing number of Filipinos have come to appreciate. That if they are employed, are providing for their families and securing a tangible improvement in their own and their families' lives (better schooling for their kids, actual homes, even a business to retire on), it's because of their own hard work and not what the Philippine government has done.

The best that the government has been able to do—on both sides of the political aisle, administration and opposition—is to try to flatter overseas Filipinos while making sure they don't enter the political equation. For Speaker Jose de Venecia (a veteran, incidentally, of Philippine efforts to send laborers to Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Middle East), there was little he could actually promise overseas Filipinos. All he could do was promise an OFW representative a leadership position in the Lakas-CMD party. More of the usual home-grown patronage, in other words.

The problem is that the proposals to "reform" Philippine politics ignore the huge electorate that, until very recently, was suffering from taxation without representation; and which, having gained a limited vote (only for national officials) was going to be stripped of it. Even in OFW circles, I found limited enthusiasm for an idea I had hoped they'd propose, something that the Italians have done. The Italian Senate reserves seats for representatives of overseas Italians. We often hear of how ridiculous a nationally elected Senate has become, and suggestions to restore a regionally elected upper house. What about an internationally elected one? But no dice, even from OFWs.

I once heard of an OFW community that was up in arms because its members were invited to the Philippine Embassy, only to discover that the attendance sheet they had been asked to sign, was sent home to Manila as a "manifesto of support" for the administration. But that was the end of it—and will always be the end of it, until any administration realizes it has to attend to OFWs year-round—not just order up brass bands and hand out prizes when workers return home for the holidays.

An entrepreneur I recently talked to told me, Philippine officialdom has turned mulcting our OFWs into a science. They are squeezed dry for permit fees, forced to submit to placement agencies either government-run or well-connected with the government, with exclusive rights to deploy to certain places—which means corruption both at home and abroad for the officials concerned. Where is the financial credit to keep OFWs from being buried in debt before they've even left? And where are the efforts to keep their families and homes safe? Where, in a word, is the quid for all the quo, quo, quo government demands? It's nowhere, the entrepreneur angrily said, not even in the promises of the politicians.

And yet you'd expect a Filipino overseas community of over 10 million-strong to put the fear of the electorate in any candidate. But when the Comelec, for example, announced OFWs can vote online in May, one of them found out about it only because I had blogged it. Which means many more will never know. And there lies the lost democratic potential.

SAMU'T SARI

Shirley's Coffee Shop workers clean up trash behind school

On Jan. 24, volunteers from Shirley's Coffee Shop joined to pick up trash at the beach behind the Saipan Community School and Church.

The cleanup will be their first of many, as Shirley's Coffee Shop signed up with DEQ to participate in the Adopt-A-Beach program.

Over 48 pounds of trash were removed. The debris comprised cigarettes and cigarette filters, food wrappers/containers, glass bottles, aluminum cans, cups, plates, forks, knives and many other picnic type garbage.

Congratulations to Shirley's Coffee shop for demonstrating how community support can make a difference in the protection and conservation of our island's marine resources.

To learn more on how to adopt a beach, visit the DEQ website at www.deq.gov.mp or call Reina Camacho at 664-8500. ***(PR)***

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Volunteers from Shirley's Coffee Shop pick up trash at the beach behind the Saipan Community School and Church on Jan. 24.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Volunteers from Shirley's Coffee Shop pose beside the bags of trash they collected at the beach behind the Saipan Community School and Church on Jan. 24, 2007.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

CLEANUP TEAM

CNMI POWER members pose for a souvenir picture after the cleanup last Sunday, Feb. 4, covering the Garapan Elementary School the whole MIHA Housing area from 99 Cents to the other block. This is the spot that the group is adopting to clean every first Sunday of the month. A short ceremony was held at American Memorial after the cleanup for the Beautify CNMI! to introduce CNMI POWER as one of their volunteers.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

CAR SHOW

A#1 RIDEZ general auto repair shop staff pose beside their "pimped up" car during the Saipan 1st Annual Import Night at the Paseo de Marianas last Saturday night. Jan 27.

Endangered Species and Wetlands
I man ke' ke mâfnas na gâ' ga' yan I susonyan
Maal kka raa kke rosoló me leebwél
Nightingale Reed-Warbler
(Acrocephalus luscinia)
Green Sea Turtle
(Chelonia mydas)

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

EDUCATIONAL ISLAND

Multi-Sectoral Overseas Filipino Workers Movement Inc. president Marites Aquino Castillo joins other MOVER officers and members during the signage ribbon cutting ceremony for the Kagman Educational Island opening, which is a joint project of the Coastal Resource Management Office and the Marianas Resource and Conservation Office. Jan 30.

JACQUELINE HERNANDEZ

Team Anies Imusa's Laila Sanchez and Vanjie Lagmay pose beside the 2004 Ford F150 XLT Flare side during the Saipan 1st Annual Import Night at the Paseo de Marianas last Saturday night. Jan 27.

Maharlika
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